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# Sudanese Toponyms Related to Greek Entrepreneurial Activity

Antonios Chaldeos

## Toponyms as a source of history

The toponym is the name given to a certain (specific) location, beyond the geographic coordinates. Toponyms are the most convenient means that the human mind has created in order to define the position of a geographic space. The inventory of a place name exists in a region, gives not only a geographic description, but also represents a view of the past. Actually, it is a vibrant source of information regarding the history of a place. The ethnocultural groups that settled in an area, their interrelations and the linguistic and cultural particularities of a geographical location are reflected in the name of a region that reaches up today. All these factors lead to the formation of a toponymic history, which highlights the successive population settlements and cultural osmosis that occurred in a place.

If the names, under which sites are recorded, mark a set of information about them and the broader areas, the resistance of place names and microtoponyms over time allows control of remarkable aspects of the historical path of the site. For example, the retention or deletion of the place name can highlight the linguistic and cultural continuity or the integration of immigrant markings on the local dialect or language. Furthermore, it can cast light in several sectors of the settlers' daily life, such as the preserve or abandonment of agricultural, livestock or other economic activities in the given region, reports on land use that have been abandoned or changed. It can even revive elements of the past that have remained in the collective subconscious unless someone detects the primary meaning of the toponym.

At the same time, the age of a microtoponym can also be checked in connection with the concepts it denotes. The observation of microtoponyms that proved extremely resistant to time and remained

in use by the residents of a specific place often reveals secret truths. Therefore, one can identify the impact of major events on the history of a place and highlight aspects of its economic and social life since these alterations are reflected in the place names of a country. The place names, depending on their origin, can be classified in several categories. A general classification is the distinction in names derived either from a human activity or from natural phenomena. Moreover, they sometimes depend on the geographical feature of the place that they describe. To sum up, populations' movement during centuries or settlement in specific geographical locations, the sequence of events governing the stay or swapping of populations over time, linguistic and cultural characteristics of settlers and their interrelationships, are obvious causes that define the use of toponyms in a given region.<sup>1</sup>

### The Greek presence in Sudan up to 1956

The Greek settlement in Sudan is long and diverse with significant presence in various fields of political, economic, cultural and sporting life of the country. The origins of Greek immigration in Sudan are dated back to the first half of the 19th century and are directly linked to Mohamed Ali's campaign, which began in 1821 and aimed to conquer the region beyond Upper Egypt.<sup>2</sup> We should note that the expedition of Mohamed Ali included several Greeks such as Arvanites mercenaries.<sup>3</sup> Apart from them, we should also add the number of Greeks who followed Ismail Pasha as officers,<sup>4</sup> interpreters,<sup>5</sup> suppliers,<sup>6</sup> and doctors.<sup>7</sup>

In 1821, during the campaign to conquer Sennar, Ismail Pasha created the first residential installations in Khartoum in order that part of the military force could remain for longer periods in the city. Subsequently, soldiers, Egyptian and Greek merchants and indigenous peasants, mainly from the area of the Blue Nile, began to settle in Khartoum. In the following years, a number of qualified personnel like shipbuilders, sailors, craftsmen, gunsmiths, and bakers settled in Khartoum, while Greeks opened the first and only pharmacy in

1 PANAGIOTOPOULOS et al., *Πληθυσμοί και Οικισμοί του ελληνικού χώρου*.

2 ΕΥΑΓΓΕΛΙΔΗΣ, *Ο εν Σουδάν Ελληνισμός*, pp. 104–5.

3 ROBINSON, "The Conquest of the Sudan by the Wali of Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha, 1820–1824," pp. 47–58.

4 Elias bey, from Crete, embraced Islam and became governor of Taka between 1845 and 1860. See BAKER, *The Nile Tributaries of Abyssinia*, p. 51.

5 In 1874 Marcopoulos participated in an expedition that reached Suakin. See MYERS, *Life with the Hamran Arabs*, pp. 9–10.

6 POLITIS, *Ο Ελληνισμός και η Νεωτέρα Αίγυπτος*, vol. A, pp. 177–78 & 249.

7 POLITIS, *Ο Ελληνισμός και η Νεωτέρα Αίγυπτος*, vol. B, p. 377; Sudan Archives Durham (henceforth, SAD) 961/8/16; KRAMER, LOBBAN & FLUEHR-LOBBAN, *Historical Dictionary of the Sudan*, p. 192; BAKER, *A Narrative of the Expedition to Central Africa*, vol. 2, p. 146.

town. From 1830 onwards, as Sudan was a kind of hinterland for those who lived and operated business in Egypt, few Greeks settled in the region trading ivory, leather, and ostrich feathers.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, since the Greeks were the first Europeans residing in the area from the mid-19th century,<sup>9</sup> they often guided expeditions south of the River Nile.<sup>10</sup> The first migrations were either in Omdurman or in the port of Suakin on the Red Sea. Actually, when the construction of the Suez Canal was completed in 1869 the number of ships that crossed the Red Sea and stopped for refueling in various ports grew rapidly. As a result of this, the Greek migration flow intensified and led to the establishment of several Greeks in Suakin.<sup>11</sup>

In 1898 Kitchener's forces conquered Omdurman<sup>12</sup> and Sudan became *de jure* a Condominium of Great Britain and Egypt.<sup>13</sup> While the British consolidated their domination throughout the country, the Greeks began gradually to move beyond their initial settlements that were established by the mid-19th century. Actually, the internal dispersion of the Greeks was impressive. They settled, in every province of Sudan, even in the most remote and even when very few other Europeans had arrived yet. The Greeks were mainly inspired by the possibilities and prospects of trade and moved in every direction settling in many cities and townships of the vast African country. During the 20th century, the Greek community in Sudan, which numbered more than 5,000 members, entered a period of prosperity and unprecedented progress.<sup>14</sup> They controlled substantial parts of the Sudanese economy and they influenced a very important period of contemporary Sudanese history, especially between 1956 and 1971.<sup>15</sup>

The Greek presence in Sudan, and foremost the range of the entrepreneurial activity of the Greeks, influenced also the toponomastics of the country. Four place names derived, which until today give important insight into the history of the Greeks in Sudan during that period. The four Sudanese place names related to the Greek entrepreneurial activity are the microtoponym *Aburoof*, located in Omdurman, the toponym *Kosti* in White Nile province and two street names in Khartoum, *Katarina St.* and *Cunt Mukhlis St.* Below we will analyze their origin as well as the reasons they remained in use in Sudanese geography and language.

8 OLYMPIOS, *Το Άγγλο-αιγυπτιακό Σουδάν*, pp. 7–8; CROMER, *Modern Egypt*, Vol. 2, p. 250; KRAMER, LOBBAN & FLUEHR-LOBBAN, *Historical Dictionary of the Sudan*, p. 110.

9 ΠΑΗΤΙΚΟΣ, *Εικονογραφημένη Αφρική*, vol. A.

10 MELLY, *Khartoum, and the Blue and White Niles*, p. 146.

11 PHOTOPoulos, "Οι Έλληνες στο Σουδάν κατά τον 19ο αιώνα," pp. 347–60.

12 ABD AL-RAHIM, *Imperialism and Nationalism in the Sudan*, p. 40.

13 MACMICHAEL, *The Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*, p. 65.

14 KAMITSIS, *Το Σουδάν και ο Ελληνισμός του*, p. 37; YACOB PASHA, *England in the Sudan*, p. 170;

POLITIS, *Ο Ελληνισμός και η Νεωτέρα Αίγυπτος*, vol. B, p. 353.

15 TSAKOS, "The Agarik in Modern Sudan," p. 116.

## Aburoof

Apart from the exploits of financial resources of Sudan, including ivory and gold,<sup>16</sup> and the opportunity to crush the remnants of the Mamelukes who had taken refuge in northern Sudan,<sup>17</sup> an important reason of Muhammad Ali's campaign was the acquisition of a large number of slaves, both to staff his army and also to meet the manpower needs in order to start the infrastructure and modernization of Egypt.<sup>18</sup> We should note that, the slave trade was a widespread and highly profitable activity in the valley of the Nile well before the nineteenth century. Moreover, the possession of slaves was a symbol of high social status.<sup>19</sup>

Actually, the sultan of Darfur was among the major traffickers. Starting from Darfur, the slave trade followed two paths. The first and most common was "the road of forty days," which started from El Fashir and Kobe and ended in Asyut in Egypt.<sup>20</sup> The second route was along the Nile, reaching the markets of Shendi, Berber and Dongola through El Obeid in Kordofan. The route sometimes was shifting eastwards through the port of Suakin in Red Sea, where slaves were transferred to Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula.

With no doubt, the conquest of Sudan, which was a kind of hinterland for those who lived and operated business in Egypt, marked the start of a lucrative slave trade, which initially involved officers of the Turkish-Egyptian army and later traders operating in the region, mostly Egyptians and Europeans.<sup>21</sup> According to reports, in 1839, more than 200,000 were sold as slaves.<sup>22</sup> As a result, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the slave trade was the main commercial activity in South Sudan.<sup>23</sup> Apart from the slave trade, which was undoubtedly the leading sector of the economy, other fields of commercial activity was the trade of ivory, cattle, goats, and gum Arabic.<sup>24</sup>

As mentioned above, the campaign carried out by Mohammed Ali in 1821 triggered the Greek settlement south of Egypt.<sup>25</sup> During the

16 DEHERAIN, *Le Soudan Égyptien sous Mehmet Ali*, p. 27.

17 NIBLOCK, *Class and Power in Sudan*, p. 7.

18 DODWELL, *The Founder of Modern Egypt*, p. 63; DEHERAIN, *Le Soudan Égyptien sous Mehmet Ali*, p. 37.

19 BAKER, *The Nile Tributaries of Abyssinia*, p. 516; SANTI & HILL, *The Europeans in the Sudan 1834-1878*, p. 218; CLARENCE-SMITH, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery*; FISHER & FISHER, *Slavery and Muslim Society in Africa*.

20 SHAW, "Darb el Arba'in: The Forty Days' Road," pp. 63-71.

21 See SEGAL, *Islam's Black Slaves*, pp. 149-153. For further details see WARBURG, "Ideological and Practical Considerations Regarding Slavery in the Mahdist State and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan: 1881-1918," pp. 246-47; JUNKER, *Travels in Africa 1875-1878*, p. 144.

22 PALLME, *Travels in Kordofan*, p. 307.

23 HOLT & DALY, *A History of the Sudan*, p. 70.

24 In 1836, more than 25,000 cattle, 6,400 goats, and 19,600 sheep were exported to Egypt. DALY, *Empire on the Nile*, 193.

25 NIBLOCK, *Class and Power in Sudan*, p. 8.

1840s, the Greek commercial activity increased. At that time, one of the leading merchants in the region was George Averoff,<sup>26</sup> who arrived in Egypt in 1837 and undertook to expand the family business, founded by brother Anastasios, on the territory of Sudan.<sup>27</sup> He partnered with his brother, but soon the relations between the two brothers will lead to a rupture, especially after an event that will determine the future of George Averoff. Anastasios was selling dates to Odessa through a merchant who owned ships and was settled in Alexandria. Since the transport cost was extremely expensive in that period of time, George Averoff decided to charter a sailboat for his own account and take the risk alone. Finally, he managed to sell them gaining huge profit. Apart from exporting huge quantities of dates to Russia, following the trade exchange, he requested and imported a large amount of gold thread (*brisim*).<sup>28</sup> George Averoff was not just a risky businessman, but also very lucky. That year an Egyptian Pasha was marrying and according to the local customs, guests had to wear gold-embroidered uniforms. None of the local market trader was in a position to supply the *brisim* needed for shiny suits except George Averoff. Consequently, these imported “gold thread Averoff,” were literally blown away in an increased price, both from the Royal Courtyard and by officials of the country. This incident helped George Averoff to associate with the Khedive of Egypt and gave him the chance to provide the palace with all kinds of valuable items imported from Odessa.

Averoff got also involved in the grain and textile trade and with the capital acquired, expanded his business. His greatest success, however, was the timely supply of the European market with Egyptian cotton when shortage occurred because of the American Civil War. Having found full economic prosperity, Averoff engaged in banking, acquiring the control of the Egyptian cotton trade but also the Egyptian economy in general. He accumulated significant funds and also dealt with the purchase and lease of land on the banks of the Nile. Furthermore, his riverboats were carrying goods at the ports of the Nile, almost monopolistic, leading to his dominance in the domestic and foreign trade of Egypt.

Between 1850 and 1860, the commercial activity of the Greeks reached a peak.<sup>29</sup> That time, the great merchant houses of Egypt like the Greek one of Averoff, intensified their economic penetration in

26 See more in CHATZIFOTIS, “Οι Μετσοβίτες στην Αλεξάνδρεια,” pp. 87–96; SKAFIDAS, “Ιστορία του Μετσόβου,” pp. 294–99 & 392–96; PLATARIS-TZIMAS, *Κώδικας Διαθηκών, Μείζονες και ελάσσονες ευεργέτες του Μετσόβου*, pp. 288–333; POLITIS, *Ο Ελληνισμός και η Νεωτέρα Αίγυπτος*, vol. B, pp. 256 & 258–63.

27 POLITIS, *Ο Ελληνισμός και η Νεωτέρα Αίγυπτος*, vol. A, pp. 257–63 and vol. B, pp. 177–78.

28 ΤΡΙΤΟΣ, “Η συμμετοχή των Βλάχων στην επανάσταση του 1821 και στη δημιουργία του νεοελληνικού κράτους. Η περίπτωση του Γεωργίου Αβέρωφ,” pp. 505–20.

29 NIBLOCK, *Class and Power in Sudan*, p. 9.

Sudan, especially in Khartoum and Suakin, but also in cities located near the border with Ethiopia, like Kassala.<sup>30</sup> Beyond the cotton trade, Averoff exported Arabic gum and ivory from southern Sudan to England.<sup>31</sup> Since Omdurman, and specifically an area on the banks of Nile, used to be an important center of Averoff's entrepreneurial activity, that place was named Averoff < Aburoof (in Arabic). According to the diary of Nicholas Papadam, which is part of the Sudanese archives collection located in Durham University, in 1872 George Averoff toured in all commercial centers flourished at that time (Khartoum, Musalama, Sennar, Gedareff, Kassala) in order to make an investment. Finally, he chose an area in Omdurman which became the trade station of the ships that cross Nile transferring goods from Egypt to Sudan and vice versa. Ever since, local merchants and indigenous Sudanese called the dock (*mousra*) Aburoof.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, according to Omdurman residents' local histories, Averoff was involved in the slave trade, an activity that lasted for decades and made him earn a great part of his huge property. We should note that during the 1850s, a few Sudanese nomadic tribes were involved in raids for slave plunder and sold the slaves to Arabs, Egyptians, and Europeans merchants, including the Greeks.<sup>33</sup> Actually, in the late 1860s, more than 60,000 slaves were sold in the area of Bahr al-Ghazal and in the late 1870s, the Greeks of Kassala and Gedaref were blamed for extensive use of slaves on their cotton plantations.<sup>34</sup> One of the main slave transfer points was Omdurman, where slaves boarded in ships besides the Nile shore and then transferred to Egypt. Nowadays, a few Sudanese believe that most of these ships belonged to Averoff. For that reason, and since the slave trade was one of the main economic activities in Sudan for a long period, the microtoponym Aburoof remained in use in Omdurman residents' language and till now is the name of one of the oldest districts of Omdurman.

### Kosti<sup>35</sup> (also Kusti)

The province of "White Nile" is located on the southeast of Gezira. Ed Dueim is the administrative center of the region. The initial presence of Greeks in the "White Nile" province dates back to 1867, when Ioannis Kyriazis, Theofanis Bekiaris and Ioannis Maistros set-

30 BAKER, *The Nile Tributaries of Abyssinia*, p. 70.

31 POLITIS, *Ο Ελληνισμός και η Νεωτέρα Αίγυπτος*, vol. B, p. 177.

32 SAD 958/5.

33 WILLIAMS, *Life in the Soudan*, 152.

34 NATSOULAS, "The Hellenic Presence in Ethiopia," p. 105; Letter of Gordon to his sister, dated between 1874–1879 in BLUNT, *Gordon at Khartoum*, p. 116.

35 An alternative explanation for the toponym Kosti has come to the attention of Alexandros Tsakos, who intends a publication in the future.



tled there and dealt with rubber trade.<sup>36</sup> Three decades later, when the British consolidated their domination throughout the country, begins a new phase of Greek presence in the area.

Nearby Ed Dueim, is Kosti (also Kusti). Kosti, which lies 205 km south of Khartoum on the west bank of the White Nile, owes much of its existence to its critical location at a point where West African pilgrims traverse the river on their way to Mecca. Kosti city is named after the Greek trader Kostas Mourikis (1867–1937),<sup>37</sup> who arrived in Sudan in 1899 along with his brother. Mourikis established a store next to the Nile and dealt with the locals.<sup>38</sup> Gradually, as transactions increased, many traders moved next to the Kostas Mourikis business and built houses and several stores. In a few years, Mourikis settlement transformed from a desolate place to a populous village. Having recognized Mourikis' contribution to the local economy, the Sudanese named the provincial city after his first name, Kostas > Kosti.<sup>39</sup> In 1910, the British built a railway bridge in Kosti and inaugurated the first railway station west of the White Nile, transforming Kosti to a receiving and transporting centre for goods and livestock from Kordofan and Darfur as well as the northern parts of the southern provinces.

### Katarina St. and Cunt Mukhlis St.

In Sudan, there are at least two microtoponyms whose name derived from Greek names and are in use since the 20th century. Two are especially popular. These are Katarina St. and Cunt Mukhlis St., both located in Khartoum.

Katarina St. is the road next to “El Qurashi Gardens” and very close to the International Airport of Khartoum. That street was given the name Katarina by a Greek lady Katarina Kakou who was born in Suakin in 1893 (fig. 1).

Her father George Kakos was from Leros Island and immigrated



Fig. 1. Katerina Kakou at an early age in Khartoum (photo provided by her granddaughter Aspasia Papadellis).

<sup>36</sup> VOLIANITES-EVANGELIDES, *Hellenism in the Land of Nile*, p. 303.

<sup>37</sup> ARTIN, *England in the Sudan*, p. 173.

<sup>38</sup> VOLIANITES-EVANGELIDES, *Hellenism in the Land of Nile*, p. 304.

<sup>39</sup> KRAMER, LOBBAN & FLUEHR-LOBBAN, *Historical Dictionary of the Sudan*, p. 256.



to Sudan in the late 19th century. At the age of 19, Katerina got married to Alexander Papadellis and had eight kids. Her husband, who was an employee, died at an early age. Most of the kids of Katerina were raised by their uncles in Port Sudan. Katerina had great difficulties in raising the rest of her kids. She used to sell several things in front of her house such as fruits, peanuts, cooked beans (*fulia*) to earn her living. Although she was poor she was giving help to anyone needed. Lots of people living in the neighborhood visited her in order to take a free meal. Katerina used to be a reference point for the entire region, till her death in 1983. For this reason, the street in front of her house, was named Katarina Street.<sup>40</sup>

Cunt Mukhlis St. is the road which crosses Baladiyya Street and El Gamhuria Avenue in the centre of Khartoum. It was named after Gerasimos Contomichalos (Contomichalos > Cuntmichlos > Cunt Mukhlis), the wealthiest Greek who lived in Sudan in the first half of the 20th century with invaluable contribution both to the Greek local community and to the Sudan itself.

Gerasimos Contomichalos was born in Kefalonia in 1883. After he had fulfilled his studies, he went to Sudan to work by his uncle Angelos Kapatos, a Greek pioneer who had established a commercial house. Since Contomichalos worked almost in all branches of his uncle's firm, he had the opportunity to travel throughout the entire country. In 1907, he settled in Port Sudan and in 1914 he moved to Khartoum. In 1921, he founded The Sudan Trading Co. and a few years later he established a commercial house under the name Contomichalos Dark & Co with branches in Sudan, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and London. His multifarious activities expanded in the fields of commerce, agriculture, banking, real estate, and ships handling. During the 1930s, Contomichalos was the foremost business magnate throughout Sudan.

Apart from a successful businessman, Contomichalos offered his services to the Greek community. For more than twenty years he was the president of the Greek community of Khartoum and main benefactor of almost all Greek communities throughout Sudan. For his services to the Greek compatriots, he was decorated by the Patriarchates of Alexandria and Jerusalem and the Greek government. Contomichalos's contribution to the development of Sudan was also recognised by several foreign governments.<sup>41</sup> Without doubt Contomichalos was an emblematic figure in Sudanese economic history between 1920s and 1930s. Sudanese people recognized his great con-

40 Oral interviews with members of her family, such as Suzan Papadellis, Aspasia Papadellis, and Alexandra Papadellis.

41 He received the Gold Cross of the British Empire, the "Order of the Nile" by King Fuad of Egypt and the "Commander of the Legion of Honour" by the French Republic.

tribution to the progress, development, and prosperity of the country and in order to express their gratitude, they named a main street of the capital under the name of Gerasimos Contomichalos.

### **The influence of the Greeks on the modern toponyms of Africa**

The Modern Greek presence in Africa dates back to the late 19th century. However, the Greeks resided in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt since the mid 16th century, since these regions were part of the Ottoman Empire and internal migrations were frequent. The Greeks dealt with the trade, introduced new methods and techniques in the agriculture sector and became pioneers in the industrialization of several African countries.<sup>42</sup> Gradually, they obtained a fundamental role in the local economies. This fact affected the local societies including their toponyms' history.

So, except Sudan, I have traced toponyms influenced by the modern Greek presence also in Tunisia and Ethiopia. Specifically, in the northeast of Tunis, in the Ariana suburb, there is a street by the name *Rue Couvopoulos*. It was named after the trader George Couvopoulos, who settled in Tunis in 1890 and gradually acquired a prominent role in the city's economy.<sup>43</sup> In Ethiopia and specifically in Addis Ababa, there is a place called *Sarris*. Sarris was a Greek pioneer who introduced viticulture in the capital of Ethiopia in the 1920s and established the first distillery factory. It is obvious that the above mentioned microtoponyms, like the ones that exist in Sudan, are related to the Greek entrepreneurial activity and recorded for the first time during the first decades of the 20th century. They resulted from the crucial role of few people who influenced the local communities with their economic activities.

Although the Greeks were not numerous in Africa, they affected the local societies, especially in the economic sector. They became part of the local history, were integrated into the culture of several African countries and they sometimes defined the toponyms formatting procedure.

### **Conclusion**

The genesis of a place name is associated with national, historical, religious, political, geomorphologic, climatic, and other factors. Generally, a toponym expresses people's tendency to define a place by the dominant characteristic that describes it. The linguistic richness of a place name reflects occupations, human manners and at-

<sup>42</sup> CHALDEOS, *The Greek Community in Mozambique*, p. 190.

<sup>43</sup> CHALDEOS, *Η ελληνική παροικία της Τυνησίας (16ος-21ος αι.)*, p. 122.

titudes, habits and behaviors; terms of topography, flora and fauna or buildings' denotation and weather conditions. Therefore, the interpretation and study of a place name does not lead only to conclusions about its origin, but also assists in the thorough interpretation of its history. Sudan topography and toponomastics is influenced by the country's long historic background and the mosaic of nations and races that lived together in its territory all these centuries.

Sudanese toponyms, which derived from Greek names, resulted from the multifarious Greek presence that dated back to the 19th and 20th century. The role of the Greeks to the social and economic status of Sudan was so prevalent that it affected also the toponomastics of the country. Despite the fact that some of these place names are used firstly by the British who dominated Sudan till 1956, they remained in use till now to remind everyone of the Greeks who lived in Sudan and till now they persist part of its long history. Although some toponyms, like Aburoof, symbolize also a dark period in Sudan's past, it is remarkable that among the few European street names one can see in Khartoum nowadays are Katarina St. and Cunt Mukhlis St.

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